



Creating an Inclusive and Safe Choir Room

Christopher Larson

University of South Dakota

Vermillion, South Dakota

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For a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) student, there is almost no experience in life that is normal. In our western culture, judgmental statements, "looks," and the prejudices of others are a constant background noise affecting what LGBT students do, how they act, and what they say.

All music educators would agree that music should be an expressive outlet for every person, especially school-age young people. It is our opportunity and obligation as musicians to try to understand the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of others. We should empathize with the ups and downs of our students, listen to them, nurture them, and help them grow as individuals.

Music rehearsals, classrooms, and performances are, or should be, a safe place to be oneself and express one's emotions without fear of ridicule or snide remarks. All of us are judged by others at one time or another, but I believe the music room and the music rehearsal is never the place for making judgmental statements of any kind about other people.

Hatred, caustic, and careless remarks can be a crushing weight on the shoulders of young people. Sometimes it is direct and blatant, as when someone uses derogatory language toward people who are "different." At other times it comes across as a flippant, critical comment. These sharp comments are hurtful and build up tension in an LGBT student. Some are able to ignore the remarks. Some challenge them.

Too often in today's culture, being "different" is bad. Being gay is sometimes demonized. In the eyes of some peers, an LGBT student is less than human. Making fun of him or her or inflicting pain is something of a game.

LGBT students are often made to feel like ciphers without feelings. GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) reported that in April of 2013, "fag" was tweeted 14,563 times

in one day, "dyke" 25,065 times in a week, and "so gay" was tweeted 279,540 times.

A student from Sioux City, Iowa, told me that in her middle school, hate-filled, bigoted language flew around social media sites constantly and was often directed at fellow classmates. Another student told me about arriving at his locker after class and finding several notes taped to his locker that made fun of him, called him a fag, and wished he would die. No person should be able to use such language and get away with it.

Here's a rhetorical question: How often have you heard, even peripherally, the words *faggot*, *queer*, *dyke*, etc. spoken about a student and done nothing about it? Such words or phrases are meant to hurt.

Eighty-five percent of LGBT students report being verbally or physically bullied according to GLSEN. LGBT students are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide. What can we teachers do?

1. With approval of your principal, set up appropriate disciplinary action for those who use offensive language (see above). Enforce the rules fairly and without fail.

Where I taught, my students received a detention (filing music in my office) if I heard them using derogatory/offensive language about anyone.

In the city of 800 where I began my teaching career, I wasn't aware of any LGBT students singing in our choirs. About three-fourths of the high school, seventy-seven students, were involved in choir. Having left that position, I am now aware that at least four LGBT students were a part of our small program. In my way of thinking, it is unacceptable for students to use dis-

criminy and/or hateful language even if no LGBT students are members of one of my classes.

2. Keep an open mind. Use inclusive language.

Even though a number of the composers whose choral music we program are or were homosexual, we should not exclude their music on that basis. Composers use texts that talk about love and life. That does not prevent them from writing about a guy being in love with a girl, or vice versa.

At a dress rehearsal for a holiday concert at the University of South Dakota, I had a powerful and transformative experience. I was struggling with my sexuality. Matthew Harden, now at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, had put together all of the men from the three choirs to sing the *Biebl Ave Maria*. At this time, I hadn't come out to anyone.

All of us guys were standing in the balcony singing. The music just wasn't coming alive. There was no emotion, no involvement. Dr. Harden wouldn't accept that from us. He said, "Come on, guys. You're better than this. Doesn't this text and music mean anything to you? Close your eyes. Picture the person you love. I don't care if it's your girlfriend, your boyfriend, your parents, or grandparents."

A warm sense of acceptance filled me and rushed through me. Dr. Harden continued, "Now imagine that you have to sing this music to save them. It's the only thing you have to do. Just sing this song!"

The *Biebl* took on a whole new meaning for me. It was glorious, or it felt like it to me. I don't know if the singing was any better, but it didn't matter. That particular work had become special, even magical.

In rehearsals with your singers, don't lose any opportunity you might have, any small comment or gesture, to illuminate a text, share a story, or make a point that helps. Someone will "get it." Someone will be lifted to a new level, a better understanding of themselves.

3. Have an open-door policy

Hopefully, you have shown your students that you have an open mind. Be willing to listen to them, talk to them. Are you busy? Take time to listen anyway. You are their choir director and a role model.

Music is a highly personal experience with emotional and spiritual dimensions. It touches lives and stirs feelings. You may be the adult your singers come into contact with the most every week.

If your students are participating in mixed choir and show choir, that's great. Go another step. Offer extra rehearsals for all-state auditions and voice lessons, either group or individual. Interaction with you can be a lifeline to those students who are struggling with their identity. Be there for them.

4. Seek out helpful resources

A number of excellent resources are available to help you broaden your understanding of LGBT issues. First and foremost is GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, an organization that conducts research in schools, offers Safe Space kits and posts a National School Climate Survey. Other activities of this national organization include a No Name-Calling Week, a National Day of Silence, and webinars on discriminatory school policies and practices, sports and other extracurricular activities plus experiences of LGBT youth in US schools.

Go to the website, GLSEN.org, and you will find lesson plans, curriculum, non-specific anti-bullying resources, examples of anti-bullying policies (both in the classroom and for the district), professional development workshops, and how to start a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) club at your school. Its purpose is to make sure your school promotes a safe, supportive environment for all students.

5. Talk to your colleagues

If you find that a student is having trouble in your school because of bullying or a difficult time at home because of coming out, talk to your teacher friends. Together you will find issues that need to be addressed and that may help the student.

Talk to friends who are LGBT. They may offer helpful ideas and present another perspective. Be supportive of the struggling students.

6. Consider changing the names of your choral ensembles

You may discover that transgender students are uncomfortable with the names of the ensembles of which they are a part. A female friend of mine told me she chose not to sing with any choral ensembles and remained in the orchestra. Her choir director had told her she had to "sing like a woman" because her vocal range was that of a tenor.

Another example, unique to transgender students, is that of a female, a soprano, who is transitioning to become a male. She will struggle with some of the same vocal difficulties experienced by boys as they move through puberty. She may end

up singing in the high baritone range. I believe a male who is transitioning to become a female will experience less change vocally than a female. Certain vocal therapy approaches can help male voices become more feminine. Options vary greatly depending on the individual.

Ensemble names such as men's choir and women's chorus make it challenging for students who may not identify themselves in that manner. Better choices would include treble choir or bass choir, both of which associate vocal ranges of singers with clef sign designations, not the gender of the singer. Other options might include titles associated with the school mascot, a city landmark, or a nearby river.

7. Be supportive

Your choirs are most likely diverse groups of individuals who need your support and encouragement. If one of your students comes out to you, respond with kindness and openness. Don't act surprised. Ask a few questions, e.g., "How did you come out? Are you happier? What has changed for you?" Be positive. That person is sharing a precious secret with you. You can act like it's no big deal, celebrate their courage, and support their decision.

Kevin Fenton came to my university recently for a choral workshop. He told a special story about what singing in choirs can do for people. A student of his had created an ecumenical cantata. People from all different denominations were involved. One of the singers, a minister, was an outspoken opponent of homosexuality. At the rehearsals and performance, the minister sang next to a man Dr. Fenton knew to be openly gay. Neither man knew anything about the other. They were there to enjoy the music and create a special "moment." The performance was highly successful and the men enjoyed each other's company.

Music has the power to unify us, no matter what our cultural differences or sexual orientation may be. Music brings people together for common goals. I believe we must work together to ensure that this sublime and uplifting bond not be broken by students' fears of being themselves (i.e., LGBT) in our choirs. All students should be able to come to our choir rooms and find them to be safe places to sing, to thrive, and to belong.

Recommended Reading

Louis Bergonzi, "Sexual Orientation and Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 100, no. 4 (June 2014): 65.



If you sit down at set of sun and count the acts that you have done, and counting, find one self-denying deed, one word that eased the heart of him who heard, one glance most kind that fell like sunshine where it went, then you may count that day well spent.

—George Eliot

Sing Out Loud: Empowering Women's Choirs

Lindsay S. Pope
Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, Massachusetts
(Used with permission of
Massachusetts' *Mass Sings*, January 2014)

It is my privilege to teach at an institution where the women's choir is the premiere choral ensemble—Mount Holyoke College, the first all-women's college established in the United States. It is also my alma mater.

I direct three choirs of varying sizes and ability. During my student days, I enjoyed singing, at one time or another, in all three ensembles. It wasn't until I attended graduate school that I became aware of how often, in a co-ed institution, the women's choir is regarded as a second-class citizen in a choral program. While I understand that this secondary status is not necessarily intentional, it is a serious and ongoing problem. As choral educators, we must begin thinking about the messages we are sending women.

Are we empowering them through language, programming, and healthy vocal development, for example, or are we furthering gender stereotypes that would make women believe they are indeed less capable, less productive, less worthy of being recognized for quality work and outstanding effort?